

## **Higher education in India in global context: Issues & challenges**

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### **Abstract**

State governments have legislation in place to grant university status to private colleges, providing them with their own degree-awarding powers and much more autonomy. This is the fastest area of growth in new universities. There are currently 100 such private universities in India (16% of degree-awarding institutions). The central government also has the means to grant university status to private institutions, under the 'deemed university' category. There are currently 129 deemed universities (20% of degree-awarding institutions). It is unclear whether or not this central role will continue, given the plans to develop more decision-making to the states. system is under tremendous pressure to expand. India's young population has a huge appetite for education and, as the growth in the size of the middle classes escalates, millions are increasingly able to pay for it. By 2020, India will have the largest tertiary-age population in the world and will have the second largest graduate talent pipeline globally, following China and ahead of the USA. The opportunities for the UK to engage with India through education are considerable.

**Keywords:** increasingly ability, talent pipeline globally, huge appetite for education, tertiary-age

### **Introduction**

Higher education in India is undergoing considerable change. With over 600 million people in India under 25 years old, the system is under tremendous pressure to expand. India's young population has a huge appetite for education and, as the growth in the size of the middle classes escalates, millions are increasingly able to pay for it. By 2020, India will have the second largest tertiary-age population in the world and will have the second largest graduate talent pipeline globally, following China and ahead of the USA. The opportunities for the UK to engage with India through education are considerable.

Government plans are in place to transform the sector over the next five years. Every aspect of higher education is being reorganised and remodelled: funding, leadership and management, quality assurance, accountability, relationships with industry, international collaboration, and the way research and teaching are conducted. If these reforms succeed, the breadth and depth of the change will be transformational. But what is actually happening on the ground in the universities and colleges across India? How do they view these national plans and how are they responding to the enormous social changes happening around them? What do they think the future will look like for their institutions?

The Indian government is planning huge expansion at all levels of education. While there is no doubt that this will be the decade of change at a transformational scale and pace, India's rise faces daunting challenges. The education system as a whole is beset with issues of quality, access and equity, and change is happening much faster in some states than others.

The general standard of education in India is low. There are not enough places in schools, colleges or universities to cope with the enormous and increasing demand. Traditional approaches to meet this demand will not be sufficient in the time scale needed.

With the rise of the middle classes, an increasing number of people need not rely on the state to provide an education service. As a consequence, India has seen a dramatic shift towards private provision across the entire education spectrum, including higher education. The private sector is already playing a significant role in the development of education in India, and its influence and presence will increase substantially.

Education is vital for India's competitiveness and economic growth, but also for social stability. The disparity between rich and poor is growing, and expectations on the part of young people and their parents are high. Geographical differences are vast, compounded by social divisions and inequalities in education provision.

### **Higher education institutions in India: a brief overview**

A brief overview of the Indian higher education system provides an essential backdrop for the following research findings and comments.

There are three main types of tertiary institution in India: 1) universities and university-level institutions, 2) colleges and 3) diploma-awarding institutions. These are categorised by funding source: central government, state government and private

**Table 1:** Higher education institutions in India.

Type and number of institution	Central	State	Private	Total
University and university-level institutions	152	316	191	659
Colleges	669	13,024	19,930	33,023
Diploma-awarding institutions	0	3,207	9,541	12,748
Percentage enrolment in 2012	2.6%	38.6%	58.9%	100%

**Source:** 'Higher education in India: twelfth five year plan and beyond (2012)

If there is one overall structure which defines Indian higher education, it is the affiliated college system, the vast bulk of students study at public and private colleges which are affiliated to state universities. These colleges do not have their own degree awarding powers; they deliver the courses, curricula and examinations specified and regulated by their parent state university. The affiliated college sector is huge, enrolling over 90% of undergraduates, 70% of postgraduates and 17% of doctoral students. Some universities have as many as 1000 colleges affiliated to them. There are considerable challenges in regulation and quality control; and while there are notable exceptions, many are perceived to be sub-standard. Last year, accreditation through the National Assessment and Accreditation Council and the National Body for Accreditation of all universities and colleges was made mandatory. A huge exercise is underway to accredit the two-thirds of universities and four-fifths of colleges that do not have accredited status.

State universities, therefore, through their activities, form by far the greatest element of higher education in India. They are run and funded through their respective state governments. There is wide variation in the amount of funding they receive, but in general, they have been critically underfunded over the last 20 years. State universities depend on affiliation fees paid by the colleges for their survival. These fees, supplemented by state government funding, are generally used to pay salaries and little else; most have poor infrastructure and conduct little research, although pockets of excellence exist. Many state universities spend much of their time administering the exams and admissions to their affiliated colleges. Places at state universities are highly sought after by students.

Most, but not all, state governments have legislation in place to grant university status to private colleges, providing them with their own degree-awarding powers and much more autonomy. This is the fastest area of growth in new universities. There are currently 100 such private universities in India (16% of degree-awarding institutions). The central government also has the means to grant university status to private institutions, under the 'deemed university' category. There are currently 129 deemed universities (20% of degree-awarding institutions). It is unclear whether or not this central role will continue, given the plans to develop more decision-making to the states.

Over the last two decades, central universities and Institutes of National Importance have been the focus of central government priorities and funding. These include the IITs, IIMs and IISERs and several national institutes in specific discipline areas. Most international collaboration is concentrated in these institutes, many of which are research-based. They have high prestige in India and beyond.

The private sector has outpaced the state sector in tertiary education and is rapidly expanding. The private sector will

continue to be crucial in the growth of higher education in India and already comprises 64% of the total number of institutions and 59% of tertiary enrolment across the country. Currently, private higher education universities are growing at 40% per annum and worth \$6.5 billion<sup>26</sup>. Many potential private investors are waiting in the wings.

### Challenges facing higher education

These fall into four broad categories: the low quality of teaching and learning; the supply-demand gap; uneven growth and access to opportunity; and constraints on research capacity and innovation.

#### The low quality of teaching and learning

Arguably, the greatest challenge facing higher education in India is the chronic shortage of faculty. Various reports estimate that 30-40% of faculty positions are unfilled. Most faculties have had no training in teaching. Other issues in teaching and learning which compound the problems include:

- Outdated, rigid curricula and the absence of employer engagement in course content and skills development. Very few opportunities for interdisciplinary learning.
- Pedagogies and assessment are focused on input and rote learning; students have little opportunity to develop a wider range of transversal skills, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving and collaborative working.
- High student: teacher ratio, due to the lack of teaching staff and pressure to enroll more students.
- Separation of research and teaching; lack of early stage research experience.
- An ineffective quality assurance system and a complete lack of accountability by institutions to the state and central government, students and other stakeholders.

This has resulted in graduates with low employability, a common feature of higher education across south Asia, and an insufficient basis for movement to higher levels of study and research. These problems are endemic across higher education institutions in India, including many of the 'top tier' institutions, but particularly so in affiliated colleges and state universities.

#### The supply-demand gap

Despite an average growth rate of over 7% in the last decade, India's GER in higher education is very low. By some estimates, even if India succeeds in its target of 30% GER by 2020, 100 million qualified students will still not have places at university. India needs to drastically increase the number of places at universities and enrolment through distance learning programmes. Over the last decade, the diversity of courses offered by universities and colleges has narrowed, resulting in saturated markets for engineers, technology graduates and

MBA's.

### **Uneven growth and access to opportunity**

Despite efforts to spread the location of higher education institutions more evenly across the country, there is wide variation, particularly between urban and rural areas, but also between states. There are still significant multi-dimensional inequalities in enrolment rates between rural and urban populations, rich and poor, minority and mainstream communities, men and women and people with disabilities. 'Inclusive growth' is a priority for reform in Indian education. With the growth in the middle classes, Indian universities must prepare themselves for considerable changes in student profile.

### **Constraints on research capacity and innovation**

India do not have enough high quality researchers. The number of students taking PhDs and entering research posts is very low: 4,500 PhDs are awarded per year in science and engineering, compared to 30,000 in China and 25,000 in the US. There is systemic segregation of teaching and research; most teaching-focused universities (the vast majority) do not provide students with research experience or the skills which would prepare them for research careers.

Despite a growing reputation for 'frugal innovation', mainly driven from the private sector, the ecosystem for innovation in Indian research institutions is weak. The causes among others stem from a lack of multidisciplinary working, no development for faculty and students in areas to stimulate innovation and few links with industry. These constraints reveal themselves in the failure of Indian institutions to make their mark in the world global rankings. All the above challenges are addressed through the Government of India's 12th Five Year Plan for higher education, the main points of which are outlined below

### **Key reforms in India planned in the next five years**

The central government operates a five-year planning cycle. The twelfth five-year plan (2013-17) for higher education addresses three overarching challenges: excellence, equity and expansion.

#### **Excellence**

Priority issues include improvements in teaching and learning, and a focus on learning outcomes; faculty development to improve teaching; increased integration between research and teaching; more international partnerships in teaching as well as research; better links between industry and research to stimulate innovation; and connecting institutions through networks, alliances and consortia.

#### **Equity**

Further initiatives targeted at underprivileged and underserved populations in society and geography, addressing urban/rural, gender, people with disabilities and community divisions and inequities.

#### **Expansion**

Scaling up capacity in existing institutions, rather than creating many new government-funded institutions; enabling

discipline diversity, counteracting the skewed growth towards engineering and other technical subjects; enabling flexible and skills-based learning; ensuring a more even spread across the country; alignment to the needs of the economy; and encouraging private investment.

### **Key elements of the 12th Five Year Plan**

These three interrelated areas are not new: all have been addressed in various forms in previous five-year plans dating back to 1980. The main difference in the 12th plan is its holistic nature, with a clear focus on quality, or 'excellence', as an overarching guiding principle for expansion and equity. The excellence principle incorporates the diversification of higher education courses in response to changing economic and industry needs, the provision of greater choice and career paths for students and brings teaching quality to the fore, alongside research capability.

### **Underpinning these reforms are**

- An emphasis on leveraging technology: a huge investment in ICTs and internet access under a 'meta university framework', which enables multi-disciplinary collaboration and development of technology-enhanced learning and teaching, including MOOCs and online courses
- A national mission for 'teachers and teaching'
- Further support for multi-disciplinary research
- Further support to vocational education institutes
- More autonomy and transparency for institutions, and better coordination between regulatory bodies

### **Key proposals in the 12th Five Year Plan include**

- A strengthened accreditation system along with more autonomy for states and universities
- Improving the quality of teaching and doubling the number of faculty
- Doubling of investment in R&D to 2% over five years
- Significant investment in ICT in terms of infrastructure and content development
- A shift to a credit-based and internationally recognised assessment system
- Strengthening the capacity of existing institutions, establishing 20 'innovation and research universities' and 50 centres of excellence, training and research in science, technology, social sciences and humanities
- A review which could pave the way for-profit private education in some areas
- The introduction of schemes to target underprivileged and underrepresented students
- Support for further internationalisation through a broad range of initiatives, including increased international research collaboration, international programmes for faculty development and attracting foreign faculty to India.

### **Conclusion**

The greatest reform in the governance and funding of state universities will come through the central government's Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) or National Mission for Higher Education programme, a key part of the 12th Five Year Plan. RUSA aims to "have a completely new

approach towards funding, regulation and governance of higher education in state universities; it will be based on key principles of performance-based funding, incentivizing well performing institutions and decision-making through clearly defined norms.” This new framework was approved, with funding, by the Indian government in October 2013. Although it is too early to make any long term predictions, the initial stages of the programme, which lay the groundwork for national implementation, have been markedly swift.

Under RUSA, the central government has committed extra funding to most states for higher education in the ratio 65:35 central to state funding. This represents a significant increase in ring-fenced funding to state universities. However, there are conditions: state governments have to set up autonomous State Higher Education Councils (SHECs), which will be responsible for the planning, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation of the state’s higher education provision, in order to enhance quality and improve access to the sector. In effect, the governance of higher education, except for centrally-funded institutions of national importance, will be developed almost entirely to the states. This will have important implications for UK cooperation in system and institutional capacity building, where opportunities for consultancy services are likely to come directly from state governments.

If successful, RUSA will bring in a new era of quality assurance and accountability in state universities and colleges in India. At the time of writing, 19 states had signed up to the RUSA reforms, with more expected to follow in the next year. The first funding round is due to take place in October 2014.

Like its predecessors, the 12th plan is highly ambitious with challenging targets. Although substantial progress was made under the 11th plan (2007-2011), particularly in the creation of new institutions and driving significant expansion which moved Indian higher education from an elite to a mass system, 46.5% of the plan’s budget for higher and vocational education was unspent at the end of the term. It remains to be seen whether the 12th plan can be effectively transformed into action. Interviews with Indian stakeholders in the following sections provide insights into this crucial question.

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